

MEMORIES OF BOULDER CITY, 1932-1936: AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF MARY ANN MERRILL

Interviewee: Mary Ann Merrill

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Description

When construction began on the Boulder Canyon Project (Hoover Dam) in 1931, the nearest community was Las Vegas, thirty miles to the northwest. The first construction workers and their families camped along the Colorado River in tents and shacks under conditions only marginally suited to human habitation. It was obvious that more substantial shelter, pure water, sanitary facilities and civilized surroundings for the workers would be necessary if construction was to proceed at a satisfactory pace. On an elevated, gently sloping site seven miles southwest of the dam, federal and Six Companies employees were soon constructing a permanent town. By the end of the year over 2,500 people inhabited what had come to be called Boulder City, and their numbers grew to over 6,000 by 1934.

Mary Ann Merrill, the daughter of a dam worker, arrived in Boulder City with her family in 1932. She was seventeen years old when she was thrust into a social environment unlike anything else to be found in America. Boulder City was a federal reservation. Gambling, prostitution and whiskey were prohibited; commercial activity was highly regulated; social mores were monitored by the city manager, and there were no elected municipal officials. Administration of the city was in the hands of the Bureau of Reclamation construction engineer, assisted by U.S. deputy marshals serving as police and fire officers, and a U.S. commissioner who performed the duties of police judge. Yet, the general quality of life was, if anything, better than that enjoyed in towns of similar size throughout the country. In the midst of a crushing, world-wide economic depression, relative prosperity was assured in Boulder City, as no family could reside within unless its head was employed on the dam project.

In this 1985 oral history interview Mary Ann Merrill recalls life as a young adult in Boulder City during the 1930s. Employment, social events, recreation, housing, municipal regulations and prominent personalities are some of the topics treated.

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An Oral History Conducted by Conducted by R.T. King
Edited by Cynthia Bassett

University of Nevada Oral History Program

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CONTENTS

Preface to the Digital Edition	ix
Original Preface	xi
Introduction	xiii
Memories of Boulder City, 1932-1936	1
Photographs	19
Original Index: For Reference Only	21

PREFACE TO THE DIGITAL EDITION

Established in 1964, the University of Nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP) explores the remembered past through rigorous oral history interviewing, creating a record for present and future researchers. The program's collection of primary source oral histories is an important body of information about significant events, people, places, and activities in twentieth and twenty-first century Nevada and the West.

The UNOHP wishes to make the information in its oral histories accessible to a broad range of patrons. To achieve this goal, its transcripts must speak with an intelligible voice. However, no type font contains symbols for physical gestures and vocal modulations which are integral parts of verbal communication. When human speech is represented in print, stripped of these signals, the result can be a morass of seemingly tangled syntax and incomplete sentences—totally verbatim transcripts sometimes verge on incoherence. Therefore, this transcript has been lightly edited.

While taking great pains not to alter meaning in any way, the editor may have removed false starts, redundancies, and the “uhs,” “ahs,” and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled; compressed some passages which, in unaltered form, misrepresent the chronicler's meaning; and relocated some material to place information in its intended context. Laughter is represented with [laughter] at the end of a sentence in which it occurs, and ellipses are used to indicate that a statement has been interrupted or is incomplete...or that there is a pause for dramatic effect.

As with all of our oral histories, while we can vouch for the authenticity of the interviews in the UNOHP collection, we advise readers to keep in mind that these are remembered pasts, and we do not claim that the recollections are entirely free of error. We can state, however, that the transcripts accurately reflect the oral history recordings on which they were based. Accordingly, each transcript should be approached with the

same prudence that the intelligent reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information. All statements made here constitute the remembrance or opinions of the individuals who were interviewed, and not the opinions of the UNOHP.

In order to standardize the design of all UNOHP transcripts for the online database, most have been reformatted, a process that was completed in 2012. This document may therefore differ in appearance and pagination from earlier printed versions. Rather than compile entirely new indexes for each volume, the UNOHP has made each transcript fully searchable electronically. If a previous version of this volume existed, its original index has been appended to this document for reference only. A link to the entire catalog can be found online at <http://oralhistory.unr.edu/>.

For more information on the UNOHP or any of its publications, please contact the University of Nevada Oral History Program at Mail Stop 0324, University of Nevada, Reno, NV, 89557-0324 or by calling 775/784-6932.

Alicia Barber
Director, UNOHP
July 2012

ORIGINAL PREFACE

The University of Nevada Oral History Program (OHP) engages in systematic interviewing of persons who can provide firsthand descriptions of events, people and places that give history its substance. The products of this research are the tapes of the interviews and their transcriptions.

In themselves, oral history interviews are not history. However, they often contain valuable primary source material, as useful in the process of historiography as the written sources to which historians have customarily turned. Verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the OHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, but it cannot attest that they are free of error. Accordingly, oral histories should be read with the same prudence that the reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries and other sources of historical information.

It is the policy of the OHP to produce transcripts that are as close to verbatim as

possible, but some alteration of the text is generally both unavoidable and desirable. When human speech is captured in print the result can be a morass of tangled syntax, false starts and incomplete sentences, sometimes verging on incoherency. The type font contains no symbols for the physical gestures and the diverse vocal modulations that are integral parts of communication through speech. Experience shows that totally verbatim transcripts are often largely unreadable and therefore a waste of the resources expended in their production. While keeping alterations to a minimum the OHP will, in preparing a text:

- a. generally delete false starts, redundancies and the uhs, ahs and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled;

- b. occasionally compress language that would be confusing to the reader in unaltered form;

- c. rarely shift a portion of a transcript to place it in its proper context; and

- d. enclose in [brackets] explanatory information or words that were not uttered

but have been added to render the text intelligible.

There will be readers who prefer to take their oral history straight, without even the minimal editing that occurred in the production of this text; they are directed to the tape recording. Copies of all or part of this work and the tape recording from which it is derived are available from:

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INTRODUCTION

When construction began on the Boulder Canyon Project (Hoover Dam) in 1931, the nearest community was Las Vegas, 30 miles to the northwest. The first construction workers and their families camped along the Colorado River in tents and shacks under conditions only marginally suited to human habitation. It was obvious that more substantial shelter, pure water, sanitary facilities and civilized surroundings for the workers would be necessary if construction was to proceed at a satisfactory pace. On an elevated, gently sloping site 7 miles southwest of the dam, federal and Six Companies employees were soon constructing a permanent town. By the end of the year over 2,500 people inhabited what had come to be called Boulder City, and their numbers grew to over 6,000 by 1934. Mary Ann Merrill, the daughter of a dam worker, arrived in Boulder City with her family in 1932. She was 17 years old when she was thrust into a social environment unlike anything else to be found in America. Boulder City was a federal reservation. Gambling, prostitution and whiskey were

prohibited; commercial activity was highly regulated; social mores were monitored by the city manager, and there were no elected municipal officials. Administration of the city was in the hands of the Bureau of Reclamation construction engineer, assisted by U.S. deputy marshals serving as police and fire officers, and a U.S. commissioner who performed the duties of police judge. Yet, the general quality of life was, if anything, better than that enjoyed in towns of similar size throughout the country. In the midst of a crushing, world-wide economic depression, relative prosperity was assured in Boulder City, as no family could reside within unless its head was employed on the dam project. In this 1985 oral history interview Mary Ann Merrill recalls life as a young adult in Boulder City during the 1930s. Employment, social events, recreation, housing, municipal regulations and prominent personalities are some of the topics treated. Mrs. Merrill also contributed to a 1985 panel discussion of life in Boulder City and work on Hoover Dam. A transcript of that discussion is in the Oral History Program collection.



MARY ANN MERRILL
1985

MEMORIES OF BOULDER CITY, 1932-1936

R. T. King: We're going to be talking today primarily about a period covering no more than 4 or 5 years in the 1930s during the time when Boulder Dam was in construction, or had recently been constructed, and Boulder City was in its early stages. I'd like to begin the interview by having you tell me a few things about your own early life.

Mary Ann Merrill: Well, I was born in Arthyde, Minnesota in 1915, 16 July, and moved when I was 6 weeks old. My folks moved to Lake Nebagamon, Wisconsin. It's an old Indian name. we left there in 1925. My dad had asthma, and he'd been to Mayo brothers clinic 3 different times. They decided that he had to get out of the cold climate and get into a warmer climate. So that's when we moved west.

What was his occupation while you lived in the Midwest?

Oh, he was a distributor for Standard Oil of Indiana.

So you moved west in 1925, then. Where did you move to?

We moved to Pueblo, Colorado, and we stayed there for approximately 7 months. The winters are pretty cold there, too, and they found out that Dad couldn't take the cold so we moved to Tucson, Arizona. We lived there for several years, and then during the Depression...well, the work wasn't so good there, and my father had an opportunity to come to Hoover Dam or Boulder Dam and work at the dam. So he moved here, and then Mother and I moved later on. He came in 1932.

Can you recall what capacity he came in?

No. I had an uncle who was a pusher on the dam. He obtained a job for Dad and I really don't know just exactly what it was that he was doing. He worked down in the dam itself. My older brother came at the same time, and he was what they call a puddler. He got \$4 a day working on the dam for puddling concrete. So then Mother and I came later on.

I've got a pretty good idea what a puddler is, but I've never heard of a pusher.

Well, a pusher was [the] head over gangs of men.

Oh, I see. A superintendent in a sense. A foreman.

Yes, but they had different categories. Anyway he was a foreman over a group, or I think he was a little higher up than a foreman.

Now, your dad came by himself, then, in 1932. Is that correct?

No, my older brother George came with him. Well, now I don't know. Dad might have come a little bit earlier than George, but then George was up here, too, about the same time. I know they stayed together.

And you and your mother remained in Tucson?

In Tucson, yes.

You came out how long after your father came?

About a year and a half.

Did he have accommodations for you when you arrived?

Yes, he had a little 4-room apartment. [laughter] He was very proud of the fact that he had been able to buy a refrigerator and it was one of the old monitor type that General Electric put out. He also had a fan, so that the place would be cooler. And I remember the first time that he drove us into Vegas to do some shopping, we went by Railroad Pass and he wanted me to know that was off limits. There was also a building on the left hand

side, up on the hill, and that was off limits. In other words, we were not to go in there. At that time, why, they had the brothels, I'm sure, at both places. And it was warm. It was hot at the time of the year that I arrived, but we got along all right. I guess when you're younger, you don't mind the heat so much.

So, you came in 1933? So you would have been 18 years old at that time.

Yes.

And did you have any difficulty adjusting?

Well, no, I got along pretty good. I know that I can remember wanting to buy a dress down at the company store, and my dad said, "Well, we can't afford that right now." And he said, "I just can't afford to buy it for you." I said, "Well, I sure do need a new dress." And then he said, "Well, why don't you find yourself a job, then?" So I went downtown with my brother, and on the way back we stopped at Smith's root beer stand. The girl. that lived in the apartment next to me had worked there. Her name was Ruby. "You know," I said, "my dad told me that I should get a job if I wanted to buy this dress down there." And she said, "Well, Mary Ann, we need somebody to work here." So I said, "Do you think I could do it?" She said, "Well, it's car hop, [but] I'm sure you can." So I talked to Mr. Smith and I got a job and I went home and told my dad. I said, "Well, I've got a job. I can buy that dress." And that's what I did. So then I started working there and met a lot of the younger folks in the town. And every Saturday night they had a dance. It was at the Legion Hall, which was where the Park Service building is now on the corner of Wyoming and Nevada Highway. Everybody went to that dance on Saturday night, and we met a lot of the younger folks.

And working, I found out more about Boulder City, I think, than what I had known before.

Boulder City must have been quite different from what you experienced in Tucson. Can you describe the city for me?

Well, yes, quite a bit. I can remember when we got into Vegas. It was in [the] morning about 5:00, and I thought that was the dirtiest town I'd ever seen. It was on the main street named Fremont, where the bus stopped, and it was dusty and dirty and hot. Then we drove out to Boulder City and there was a few trees here then on the highway where they stopped. It was just before you get to Arizona Street where the bus stopped. And so we thought it was much better here than it was in Vegas, but my first impression of Vegas wasn't very good. Of course, then you only saw the downtown streets where they were dirty and not the town itself, which was very nice.

Can you give me a physical description of Boulder when you arrived? What did it look like?

Well, the downtown section looked very neat and nice. Then we got down to Avenue M, which was the last street on the east side of Boulder City. [We lived on Avenue M when we first arrived.] I didn't think very much of it. Most of the houses were, I think you might even say, shabby looking. Some of them were built with whatever they had, and they really were not substantial housing, I don't think. Some of them were better built than others, but it was sort of like a shack town, Avenue M, and that's where everybody landed that were latecomers coming into town. That's the only place that they could find to rent, was down there.

Was that part of what was called McKeeversville?

No. McKeeversville was over the hill, down in the valley. No, that was the east end of town. The very east end of town was Avenue M.

Who had built those houses?

Mostly, there wasn't a company that built the houses on Avenue M. It was mostly individuals built their own homes, their own places. Avenue L had some duplexes where we...after about 5 or 6 months, why, we did have one of the duplexes. And they were built by a company, but I'm not sure what the company was. But they were pretty substantial, pretty nice places. Fairly nice, but you had to wait in line to get into one of those.

What set that Avenue M area apart? You said that it was late arrivals. Was there anything else that set it apart from the rest of town?

No, it was just that that was the only place available to rent, you see. The town was built from Avenue A on over to Avenue F, [which] was the last street that had company homes on it. No, there might be some beyond, but they were the bigger homes through California Street. And they were all what they called the company homes. The government homes were up north. They were north of Arizona Street and on up on Colorado and Denver Street. And then, of course, they had the [California Water & Power Company homes] and the other houses that were built in that section of town. This section of town was all the company homes.

Can you describe the differences between the government homes and the company homes?

Company homes were very, very different. The government homes were mostly brick and they were built very substantially. The company homes were fairly well built, but they were usually 1- or 2-bedroom homes, one bath. Most of the bigger homes, the 2-bedroom places, had a porch two thirds of the way around—[a] screened-in porch. And then there was some smaller one bedroom ones. I don't remember whether those others were later type houses that they could take out. They were more like a trailer home. They had some of those down below what is now New Mexico, but they were just brought in there. They weren't permanent homes at all. And some of the company homes were not permanent homes, either. Some of them have been rebuilt now, and made into permanent homes. But [on] this street, Avenue H, I don't remember whether there was any of the homes here. If they were, they were the homes that were taken off of the street. These are all new homes. These were all built later on. This home was built in the 1940s. So, evidently, the homes that were built were taken off of this land.

I know that this area was a desert prior to the construction of the dam.

That's right.

By the time you came in 1933, did the houses have lawns?

Some of them had lawns; some of them had front lawns.

What would the majority have looked like?

Desert, sand; just sand and desert, and the front lawns...there's trees planted all over. They had the elms, and they had them clear down

the street. They were planted before we got here. Most of them, now, of course, because they've been diseased, have been taken out. There's a few of the elms still here that were there. But they tend to break the limbs and all because of that. It was called the Dutch elm disease. But there wasn't very many lawns. Most of the lawns that we saw when I got here was government lawns up on the government homes. They all had their lawns put in. Some of the other places had the trees planted, but they weren't very big yet. But the elms grow very fast.

Why would the government houses have had lawns and not the company houses?

Because the government put them in.

Put them in free of charge to them?

Well, I'm sure that they were put in for that, yes. They had the lawns up there and they had the park.

Of course, the company had not been required to do that.

It seems to me that there were some of them that did have lawns. I'm not sure whether the government put them in or not, because part of them were here when I got here. But not out in the far end. It was pretty sandy.

Were the streets paved?

Yes, they were paved.

All of them?

No, Avenue M wasn't paved. It seems to me that Avenue L was when we moved in, but Avenue M was not paved.

What about sewage and water and electricity and gas and so forth?

Well, they all had no gas, as I remember. Most of it was just electricity. I don't remember ever having gas down in the house, in any house. Gas came in later on. But most of the houses had electricity, and there was electricity down at Avenue M. We had electricity—electric stove. And we had to have it because we had the refrigerator, but no gas. They had the water. The water came from the river. They got the water from the lower side, I believe. The water was given to Boulder City. I think it was from below the dam. That reservoir or the other one was built later on, and I think that's where the water came from. And, of course, they had the one water tank up on the hill. That was here, and a second one was put in much later for our water supply. We had the water, and in order to encourage people to put in the lawns and all, the water rate was very low if you had lawns. And that extended into just a few years back. If you kept up your lawns and all, your water rate was lower.

Well, that's interesting. How much lower?

I don't know. I have no idea, because I never paid those bills. But I do remember that it was lower to encourage people to have lawns. Of course, you know our utilities in Boulder have been more reasonable than they are in Vegas or anywhere else anyway, but they're getting higher all the time. That's progress, I guess.

Can you recall anything about McKeeversville and, if so, can you draw some contrast between McKeeversville and Boulder City?

McKeeversville, of course, is just like Shantytown; it just grew. I told you [that]

the end of M Street was where people went. McKeeversville also was that type. They built houses helter-skelter, the streets were unpaved, and you'd go up one street and maybe down another. It's not McKeeversville any more; it's Valley View. They [now] have [paved] streets, and they've got some very nice homes and all over there. But those were all built just like they were on M—lumber here, lumber there.

Were the people who lived there any different from the people who lived in Boulder City?

No, they were just trying to make a living. They [lived in] the homes that they could get into. It was very limited: they had the company homes and the government homes. They had one block of duplexes up there on Avenue L. The rest of the homes [were] on the outskirts. There [are] none on this side but McKeeversville.

Had all the utilities and services been extended to them?

I think that they possibly did have over in McKeeversville, but I'm really not sure about that either.

Do you know whether or not they were regulated in the same way that this community was—by the government?

No, I'm not sure.

Tell me a few things about what your father was doing. Apparently you can't give me the name of the job he was involved in.

No, I don't know. I know the last few years that he was down there, he said he was a maintenance man. He had charge of the

little cubicle that's there as you go down to the tunnel. It's the one that sits over the tunnel. But I don't remember what his job was earlier.

How would he get out to the dam to go to work?

Oh, they went down in the transports.

Buses?

Yes. They were big transports. They had a 2 decker, and they had different sized transports. They transported them all down there.

Where would they gather?

Don't know. I think it was up about Arizona Street and the Nevada Highway, because it seems to me I remember them getting off up there...where the bus came in, probably. But they had dormitories and the mess hall. Anderson had that on the west end of town, and they probably took the buses from there also.

The transport was provided by the company?

Oh, yes.

There was no fee for riding it?

No, there couldn't have been a fee for it. They just took them down there. Some of them went on down below, some of them on top, of course, according to where you were working on the dam.

You were 18 at the time, and you had a job yourself. You had a brother?

Yes. Older brother. He worked on the dam.

Did you have any other brothers and sisters?

I had another brother here. He worked for the company store and he was just older than I, and he came in later, too. But Mack—I can't think of his name—was the one that did all the hiring, I know. [In 1931, E. H. McAdams became the Boulder Dam Project employment director for the Six Companies.—ed.] And Larry, he always looked younger than he was, and [Mack] wouldn't give him a job. He said, "You're not old enough to work on the dam." So Larry got a job in the company store in the produce department. He worked there for about a year and he moved to Spokane. Another brother moved up there; they had jobs up there doing something. So he never could get to work on the dam.

This would have left your house almost empty during the daytime, I suppose.

Oh, yes.

What would your mother do?

Mother didn't work when we were down there on Avenue M, but [when] we went up on Avenue L, she took in some boarders. She was a very good cook and so she had, I think, 3 or 4 boarders.

Can you recall what the going rate was?

No, I have no idea. But I know the men all liked her cooking. They were fellows that didn't live in the dormitory, and so when we moved down on Avenue D, some of them—they had extra room down there—moved in and they had rooms there with Mother, too. There was 2 brothers. I think they each had their own rooms. In fact, one of them even had his own cat. And we had 3 cats: Blackie, Whitey and Red. Mine was Red. Dad's was

Blackie, and theirs was Whitey. But that was quite the time.

Well, you've given me a pretty good physical description of what much of the town looked like. Perhaps you could add to it a little bit. You could tell me something about the downtown area.

The downtown area was nice. The Manix store was the place to go. It had everything. It had dry goods, and it had a shoe shop, and it had a little grocery store. And, of course the company store had all of these, too. They had the dress shop, and they had a drug store, and they had the grocery store. And those were the 2 stores in town. That's all we had right then. Later on we got the central market, but that was about 1936, probably. [It was] probably in 1936 when Mr. Stubbs had the first central market, and that was on Wyoming Street. Then it moved to where Smith's root beer stand was. And we had the theater. That was down from Smith's root beer stand. And a sweet shop and different things moved later.

Was the residential part of town divided in any way by the commercial area? I mean were the houses and people who lived on one side different from the houses on the other?

Yes. From Arizona Street on up was government housing.

And that's all to the north of the commercial district?

Yes. In fact, Dad, when he worked for the government, had a home up on Arizona Street. And those were government, too. He passed away here. My mother was allowed to live there, as it was a government home. She was allowed to retain the house, to rent

it. And it was on Arizona Street. Those were government, too. Forgot there was a whole row of them. But it wasn't that they were divided. It was just that that's where the government put their homes, and then these with company homes were down below.

Well, this was a planned city.

They planned it at this particular place because they thought the weather would be nicer. Which it is. It's cooler here. In the summer, it's 5 to 10 degrees cooler up here than it is in Vegas, or the lake, you know. In the wintertime, it's usually colder in Vegas than it is here at night. Well, of course, because [of] that Charleston Range, too, with the snow. But the climate here is pretty nice. It was laid out pretty well. They knew what they were doing when they laid it out.

Were there any physical barriers around the city—fences, gates, anything like that that would...?

No. There was none. There was only one road out and that was down to the dam. You couldn't go across it, then, not until 1935. There was no other gate. That was the only one, and that was the only way you could get in here. Only one way in. [chuckles]

Are there any other distinctive features that you can think of? What was it about the city that was most different from what you had experienced in Tucson and in Pueblo and other places you had lived?

Tucson was quite a beautiful city. It was green and lush. I was into all kinds of sports in high school and all and horseback riding. And I had a friend [whose] folks owned a ranch down toward Nogales, halfway. I'd

go down there horseback riding. I was used to things like that, and you didn't get them up here. I was quite into tennis, into the tournaments down in Tucson, and there was no tennis courts here. And the swimming—I was always into that, and there was no swimming pool. Later on, you had the lake. Twin Lakes. We went over there. But it was different, and I had different interests down in Tucson. I had been in a dancing class for a good many years, and I had to give that up, you know. I mean, we came here and there was none of that. So it was different. In growing up, you'd find different endeavors anyway, so.... Boulder City, of course, didn't have the substantial houses that Tucson had. [In] Tucson I was used to the nice green lawns. Tucson at that time was a city that really kept up the cleanliness, because they had so many people down there. They were in...well, not sanitariums, but tuberculosis at that time was quite prevalent. They had a veterans' hospital down there, and they had a lot of small...I guess you'd call them hospices now—hospitals for TB patients. They kept the city very clean, the streets and all very clean, because tuberculosis was very contagious at times. And so [it] really was a different place to live.

Do I understand you to say, then, that in comparison you found Boulder's streets to be not as clean?

Well, no. Not particularly. Just a different environment, I think. But I liked Boulder City in the early days, and I certainly had a lot of fun here. I found out there was other activities and later on, of course, they did get a tennis court and different things. It was in the early days. Those things just don't happen overnight, and it takes a little bit of time. But Boulder City's been a great place to live and

it—certainly was a fine place to raise our boys. We've been grateful to Boulder City for their education, and they got a fine education here. Michael went on to go to the naval academy, from which he graduated. And Jerry got a good foundation for his education. He has his Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Nevada at Reno. But the foundation was built here, in Boulder City schools, because they were very, very good.

Boulder City has a reputation for being a pleasant place to live as well, which in many ways is remarkable, because it is almost a socially artificial community. Here were great numbers of men and women and their families who had gathered together from all over the United States, who, in many cases, had practically nothing in common...

That's true.

...and who certainly didn't know one another before they had come here.

At all, they didn't.

And they are all thrown together in a big mix.

That's true.

Can you describe for me the society of Boulder City at that time? I am particularly interested in whether there were any distinctions made between different types of people within the community.

I do know that the higher-ups in the government were sort of out of reach, you know. The rest of us [were] common folk, just working people. And if you got to see Mr. Crowe, why, that was really something, because you knew he was one of the ones

that was the boss over everybody. [Frank T. Crowe was the construction superintendent for the Six Companies, Inc.—ed.] I wouldn't call it a caste system, but there was sort of a separation between the working class and the others. Naturally.

Would that be between the working class and the government, or between the working class and the white collar class in general?

There had to be some difference. There was about at least 10 men to each woman here—and perhaps even more. The men, naturally, the younger ones, stayed in the dormitory. There's some pretty rough characters, and I suppose there had to be that separation somewhere along the line. But everybody seemed to get along all right together, except that the government people sort of kept together pretty well, and the workers on their side. There was a separation of sorts, but it wasn't intentional. The workers were used to being together and the government workers together in their work. There was a separation there, and that's probably the only separation.

Of course, there was a physical separation, too, in town. We talked about that already.

Well, that's true, yes.

Were people from this side of town welcome on the government side?

Oh, yes. There is no stigma attached to it or anything. It was just the way this town was laid out that it was separated that way. There was the government lawn on the hot nights and—you know there was a lot of [it]—that lawn that men made for the government building. Many of us would go up there and take our blankets and that lawn would be

practically covered with people because it was cool. It was the thing to do, to go up there.

What would go on up there?

Well, not too much, really. The police were going around and there was no drinking on the lawn because that was taboo.

Would the families of the government workers be on the lawn out there with you as well?

No telling who was out there. It was just the thing to do to cool off. It was really interesting. You get a group of you around and talk and there, really wasn't anything else to do most nights here.

When did the gatherings on the government lawn begin to subside?

When we started getting the swamp coolers. I think that was about 1937 or 1938. The first swamp coolers were a fan going through water going down. They started to put the coolers on top of the houses, and it made living much more bearable here. You could [then] play the games inside at night. I think perhaps that had a lot to do with them not being on the lawn any more. That probably took care of that.

Saturday night was the big night. That was the dance night. And other than that, why, you made your own recreation. Had your games to play.

Well, spend a little time and tell me about that. What kind of things did you do for recreation?

I can't remember. Of course, I worked for quite a while at Smith's root beer stand. [laughter] And a lot of that was evening work. I don't know really what we did do. Have to

think about that. In fact, in going through my pictures, I found an awful lot of them that we had pictures up on that lawn. And different ones. I told Carl, I said, "I must have had a hundred pictures up on the government lawn and down at the airport."

What was the attraction at the airport?

They had that nice building. We just walked around town. We did a lot of walking, I'm sure.

Did you have anything like a promenade?

No, I can't remember having anything like that.

Well, where did boys and girls go to meet each other?

The dance and the theater.

And, of course, you were a car hop for a while. Was that a pretty big operation?

Smith's root beer stand, they had one in Vegas and one in Boulder, and especially on payday night you got quite a few tips. Root beer, I think, was 5¢, and beer was 10¢. You got a dollar a day for being a carhop. Big wages. But on a good night, you could probably make \$5 or \$6 in tips, which was good then. That was usually on payday, because the day after they probably wouldn't have any money left.

But there wasn't an awful lot to do. Of course, we went to Vegas quite often. And, like I say, there was the Twin Lakes. They had a swimming pool out there. You could go out there.

of course, Las Vegas was a pretty small town, too.

Oh, yes. It was smaller than Boulder City, population-wise—there were about 5,000 or 6,000. It was over 10,000 here.

So what would you do in Las Vegas when you went in?

I had these friends, the Ullom sisters and the different ones that worked at the Smith's in there, and we went to the picture show and we went shopping. That's just about what we did is shopped, go in there and shop. We didn't go into the gambling places very much. Later on we did. We could play bingo. They didn't have bingo like it is now; it was a sort of a different bingo, and I remember going in there and playing that. But there wasn't too much in Vegas, either, at the time. Not in the first years. Later on, of course, it began to grow and grow. By 1935 or 1936 it was getting to be a pretty good sized place.

Were the churches very active here in Boulder City?

Yes. The church that I went to then was the Catholic church. We had the Grace Community Church down the street and the Episcopal church was here. The Mormon church was just a small building up there, but it had to be here when I came—maybe 1934. They were quite active. The first church I can remember the Godbeys talking about, they had it in a tent. Of course, the Godbeys and the different ones were here in 1931; then that's what they had to do. They had the churches, and they had things built up. Yes, the churches always have been active in Boulder City.

What kind of social events would they stage during the week?

I don't remember too much about any social events. I don't think the Catholic church did have any. I can't remember.

Not even bingo?

No, they didn't have bingo. They'd have their church services. Then later on there was things, doings, especially in the Grace Community Church, but not in those early years. There was not a great deal. In the summer, they had the summer school program for the children, but I wasn't married. Didn't have any children yet, so I wasn't involved in that.

Now, the major construction company that put together the Big Six was based in Utah, and it was owned by Mormons. And many of the people who were prominent in the organization were Mormons. Was that apparent to you when you were here in 1933?

No. They [the Mormon church] were here, but I mean they were just like the rest of us. They didn't take over. There was nothing here that you could see that they were trying to take over. They have their missionaries and they had them then I'm sure too, but they didn't push themselves on anybody.

And they received no favored treatment of any kind?

No. I'm sure they didn't. I don't think they would have asked for it, but I'm sure that they didn't get any favored treatment. No church got any favored.... They were all treated equally I'm sure.

I suppose that the next logical thing to discuss, since we've been talking about religion, is morals. And this, as a planned city, had its

morals planned for it as well. The documents are very clear on that. [While it was under federal administration, Boulder City had ordinances forbidding gambling and the sale or consumption of potent alcohol. Other ordinances regulated a broad range of activities and were intended to insure an orderly society . —ed.]

Yes. That's right.

Let's forget about the documentation for a moment and talk about the reality of living here in Boulder City.

There was just young people all over. There was not supposed to be any drinking, but at the dances, during the intermission, boys carried flasks. And there was a few sips outside in the dance hall. There was none on the dance floor. But there was liquor brought into Boulder City during our days when we couldn't have it, until we decided to have liquor in the city. There was always liquor in the city. There was always some. I don't know how it was brought in or anything, but they didn't search all of the cars. But what they'd do was they'd stop the car, and if you're inebriated or they thought you were too drunk to drive, why, you'd have to sit out in that car for a while until you became sober. And I've heard them talk about that. But if you had a few to drink, if they thought you could drive, you were allowed in. It was just the ones that were figured too drunk to drive, why, they're not going to drive. But I'm sure that people brought it in. In fact, I've had quite a few drinks at times, you know, in the town. So they did have it.

Was anybody in town known to be selling it?

No, I never heard about them selling it. The way the police got around, I don't

believe that they could have. But you could go out to the outskirts, well away. I believe Klinger's was there then with that store; they were in later years. I'm not sure when they started selling liquor there. That's below the pass, but you could buy it in Vegas and I'm sure a lot of people brought it in with their groceries, because you did most of your grocery shopping...you went to Vegas to do a lot of it.

Were the prices more reasonable in Las Vegas than they were here?

Oh, yes. Company store prices are always high. Like, you owe your life to the company store, you know? That's practically true, but their prices were cheaper. And people went to town. They'd go in on payday and spend most of their money, I suppose, in there. But I'm sure that there was a lot of liquor in Boulder City, but you didn't drink it out on the streets. And, of course, they had 3.2 [percent] beer. They weren't saints in Boulder City. That's for sure. I don't mean that they were sinners, but they weren't exactly saints. Just like people anywhere.

What can you remember other than alcohol being regulated here in Boulder City? Of course, you weren't allowed to gamble. That's part of the city charter.

No. You weren't allowed to gamble. You could live as much...just like you wanted to there except for no liquor. But you could have beer... have beer parties. And, like I say, liquor was brought in. But when you went through that gate, you were supposed to be sober to get in.

Well, but I've heard some stories that may or may not be true to the effect that some of the government officials who were involved in

administering the affairs of the community would also attempt to administer the affairs of individual families.

It would be just hearsay as far as I'm concerned, because I don't recall anybody. But when you're a government employee you're supposed to, I suppose, follow their rules. You didn't make your own rules; the government made them for you if you're a government employee. As far as the other employees were concerned, I think they were left to their own devices as long as they took care of their jobs.

Of course, the others were the majority.

That's true. Huge majority. But the government has always been like that, even when my husband worked for the government until he retired. There's always their rules. You go by them.

One of the provisions of the charter, for lack of a better term, of Boulder City...no, it's not even a charter— it was written into the contract, when the contract for the construction of the dam and of the city was originally let— was the concept of creating a racially homogeneous community. It was intended that the city be inhabited primarily—in fact exclusively, as I interpret the documents—by white people of American descent. Did you see any evidence of that? Think back.

The only evidence that I know of is that we just didn't have any black people here. Not for a good many years.

Can you recall any Chinese or Mexicans or anything?

No. I don't remember any Chinese, now that I think about it...in the early days. And

I'm not even sure about Mexicans here then, but I know there was no blacks. But I didn't know whether that was because they didn't want to come. There was quite a community of them in Vegas at the time. I mean, a small community on the west side. I suppose I presumed it was just because they didn't want to come.

Well, there was another stipulation that was written into the contract, and that was that veterans would [be] given preference in hiring.

Yes.

Were you aware of any prevalence of veterans?

No. I know Dad had been a veteran, but I don't think that's why he got the job. He got it through my uncle, and I suppose it could have been that they might have been preferred over. But I know that the fellow that did the hiring, he really screened them. He was the big wig, and if he said, "You're on," you're on; if he said "You're not," you're not.

Were there ever any allegations of abuses of authority either by him or by anybody else?

Oh, I don't remember any, but I might not have heard them. I think he was pretty fair. I think that they thought he was pretty fair, but he had to be a hard man, because he put up with some hard cases. No, I think he was pretty fair in his hiring.

I'm going to give you the names of some people who were important in this community, and I'd like you to tell me what you can recall of them and of their relationship with the other people living in this community and so forth. Let's start with Walker Young, who was the construction

engineer for the Bureau of Reclamation. He was the head of the city government. Can you remember him?

I remember him. I don't remember him then as much as I have recently. I've seen him; he's a very fine man and he's very well thought of. Very, very good man.

He was back then as well?

Yes, he was always very well thought of.

Can you recall why?

No. I think he was just fair, and he was just a very intelligent man. And he was a very likeable man. He still is. He's sort of reticent in a way, but he's a nice man.

He actually didn't run the city, even though he was in charge of the area.

No, he was not here all the time, either, as I recall. Everybody that I know thinks very much of him...that know him, have anything to do with him.

His right hand man was Mr. Sims Ely.

Well, he was a hard man. I guess he was fair in a lot of ways, but he had his own ideas and he put them into practice. And you had to go by his rules.

Can you give me some examples of some of those ideas that he had?

Of course, I guess the gate was his, but he was pretty strict about the drinking. The gate was the one that you came in to town. If you were sober you got through the gate, and if you were drunk, you didn't.

Is that all that they checked for?

I'm not sure. They never checked our car for anything. Except going out one time, 4 of us were in the front seat, and I was on my husband-to-be's lap. They didn't allow 3 in the front seat of a car, and that was a little coupe. So you either went that way or not, you know. So I was reprimanded for that a little bit by a friend of mine on the police force or on the ranger force. I really haven't read all of his rules, but I know that he had quite a few of them.

You said he was a hard man. What leads you to say that?

I guess he knew how he wanted the town to be, and he made up his mind that it was going to be that way. And I suppose it's been worthwhile, because it turned out pretty good. I guess [it took] knowing the kind of people that were coming in from all over. They were people that were out of jobs, and some of them could have been criminals. They had no way of knowing whether they were criminals or not. You didn't have to put that down on your application, and I guess that he didn't want any roughness in this town. He wanted a clean, green Boulder City, I suppose. That's what he wanted, and it was his town.

In what sense?

He thought of it as his town. I've heard that said so many times: "This is Sims's town." It's just something that was said.

It sounds as if there might have been some resentment of that.

Possibly was. Not by me. [laughter] But I think perhaps there was. I think there's some

people that liked to have things changed a little bit, but as long as he was living, why, he kept it the way he wanted it. So there was probably others that know more about that, much more than I do.

Of course, what we're talking about here is not so much an individual as a system. It may be that he put the print of his personality on what was going on here, but nonetheless, the situation was such that somebody was going to be arbitrarily in charge.

That's true.

Did Mr. Ely get along well with teenage population of Boulder City?

I don't know that he didn't get along with them, but I don't think he had a good rapport with them. I think they were all sort of frightened of him, perhaps. You know? He wasn't very outgoing.

Let's imagine for a moment that you did something of which he disapproved. What could he do?

I really don't know. I don't know whether he would do it himself or it would be through the rangers.

And the rangers were, I believe you told me before, just a euphemism for police?

Yes. They were called the rangers. But I don't know that he was hard on the youngsters. I think that he just was older.

Well, the reason I'm spending so much time on this is that I've heard a number of what can only be characterized as rumors, and I'd like to be able to pin them down.

I've never heard of him being too hard on the youngsters, and I know he never was in my case. I never had any trouble, but I think we all was sort of in awe of him, perhaps, growing up knowing who he was. I think he was sort of...I shouldn't say cold, but he's just austere. Something like that. But it was just a feeling.

Well, I've been told that he had very strong opinions on the way people ought to dress...

Oh, yes. I wanted to do that.

...and behave and things like that. That he would try to impose those opinions on others. You said, "Oh, yes" when I said dress. Tell me something about the clothing code.

He was strict in things. He thought that things should be just so. You know, he was [from] an older school, and as far as a dress code was concerned, there was no dress code in the school that you couldn't wear certain things. Of course, at the time then we didn't have a high school here. They had to go to Vegas to high school.

Could Mr. Ely dismiss a man?

I would think so...I suppose he could. I think he had the authority to do it. I'm sure he had the strict authority over the city.

Well, I wonder if that might not have been sufficient to have people fear him even if he never exercised that.

It could be. Yes, that's probably true. Yes, I think he was the law as far as the city was concerned.

I'm sorry to spend so much time on this, but as I said, I really have heard so many things about

Mr. Ely, and very few of them were documented one way or the other.... I'm trying to gather as much information as I can.

He was sort of a lone person. You didn't really see him too much and, of course, a lot of what I've told you is hearsay. I think the man had his morals all right, but to impose his strictest ones on other people...that could make them pretty cross with him at times, too.

What can you tell me about Frank Crowe?

I never knew the man. I'd just seen him and met him, but he had the respect and admiration of most of the people. He knew what he was doing, too.

Can you recall any discussions within the family or outside of the family about the form of government that was imposed on Boulder City?

No, I think that most people that have lived here for a long, long time, and through those times, thought the government did pretty well for them.

But there was no desire to have a democratic system of government of your own?

Oh, yes, over the years there has always been [efforts to try] to have [things] changed. Little different groups get together and think, "Well, we can change this," and, of course, it took quite a while to change it so that we could get liquor in here. And then they didn't have the gambling. At the first time that they wanted to get the law in for liquor, one group decided that they didn't want the liquor in and so they went to the school and they had this proposition made up, and they said if you voted for liquor, you vote for prostitution, gambling and liquor. They put

it in that order. In other words, you couldn't vote just for liquor. You had to vote [for] all 3. They even sent down [from] the school, of all places, a note made out on this school stationery for the children to bring home to their parents. And I thought at the time, "This is sort of ridiculous that we have to vote not for gambling, not prostitution and not liquor, but all 3."

When was that?

It was after we were a city. So it would be about in the early 1960s.

After you were out from under control of the federal government?

Yes. And, you know, even before we got out from control, there was a group that wanted the city to take over even before the government released us. I don't think it ever got to a referendum or anything like that, but there was a group that figured that they'd like to be out from underneath.

Now, your husband was, I believe, a chemist.

Yes. He worked on the dam first, before. He was a chemist before he started working on the dam, and he was working for Max Factor's down in California. The Depression came along and his job was out in about 6 months. So his uncle, who was president of a bank down in Pasadena, got him. He knew the Anderson brothers who fed the men and had the dormitories here. so he got Carl a job as a flunky in the mess hall. That's what he did when he came here. He was carrying these big trays of dishes and all. And then he got a job in the recreation hall. The company store also had a recreation hall, and from there he went down and started working on the dam.

He was working menial labor of some kind underneath. He told this one fellow, "I'd like the wages better tying steel." He said, "How do I go about getting one of those jobs?"

"Well," he said, "you have to earn [it] or something to learn." Well, anyway, he found out how to tie the steel and that's what he was. He tied steel down there for quite a while. Then he left here for a short time, and he worked down at Yuma on the All-American canal or whatever it was down there. Worked down there...I guess it was pretty hot work... and then he went back to work with his father up in Utah in Virgin on the oil wells. That was Florence Lee's father. [Florence Lee Jones married John Cahlan, the editor of the Las Vegas Review-Journal.—ed.] Carl's a foster brother. And so he went to work with Dad up at the oil fields in Virgin. And after we were married, I moved up there. Mike was born up there. Our oldest boy was born up there in the oil fields. Michael was born [at the] end of 1937. [We] came back in 1938.

You were here when this place practically turned into a ghost town, weren't you?

Yes. That's when Carl went down to the All-American canal. He went to work for his dad, and when we came back down here, there really wasn't very much work to do. [Carl] went to work [at] the recreation hall. From there, he went to Alaska. They were starting the airport up in Anchorage. [Carl] went up there and 6 months later I went up. He was up there for 2 1/2 years. I lived there for almost 2 years. During the war, we were caught in Anchorage, Alaska. When we came back down, the magnesium plant in Henderson had started. My mother knew this woman's husband who worked there. [He] found out that Carl was a chemist. We were getting ready to leave Anchorage anyway. We figured we'd

better get out of there so Carl couldn't get caught in the army as a private. He had a job coming when we got here. [The company had] already written him that he had a job at their magnesium plant as a chemist. He worked there during the first part of the war, and then he went to work as a chemist for the [United States] Bureau of Mines. [He] retired [from] the Bureau of Mines. But he couldn't get back into chemistry. When we came out of Utah, he had a job offer for \$90 a month. It was in Denver or in Colorado somewhere, but there [weren't any] jobs for chemists then. It [was] very hard to get work. We then came back here and bought this home [in] 1942. We've been here ever since.

What effect did the completion of the dam have on the community of Boulder City?

In 1935, when the dam was finished, a lot of [the people] moved. Some of them went up to Washington where they were building the Grand Coulee Dam. Some of them went into Redding or Shasta. The men that really had the knowledge were building the dams. A lot of them went to Coulee. Some of them later went to Page. We stayed here.

What happened to the city itself?

It just went on. For a while, a lot of people seemed to be gone, but then a lot of people that liked Boulder City moved in and [took] their places. [There were] 5,000 people approximately living in town. Of course, there had been 10,000 workers. Only a thousand [were] left working here—and that was the maintenance crew on the dam. Of course, the water and power [companies] had their men living and working there, too. I'm not sure that thousand didn't include them. It possibly did. But over the years, they've put in the rest of

the turbines and all, and I guess they've got the last one in. The population stayed between 4,000 and 6,000 for several years. About the last 5, 6 or 7 years it's really increased. Now we've got limited growth.

Was there any noticeable impact on life in Boulder City with the completion of the dam?

Yes, there was because quite a few of the people moved out, naturally. They went to other jobs. You [had] a lot of the old-timers still here, but a lot of them moved to greener pastures. There [are] no jobs here, particularly. We never have had a lot of stores that stayed here. We've had a few that can still keep going, but [Boulder City] is so close to Vegas that your stores here have a hard time—like your dress shops and so forth. But we still have a few that have always been here. But you didn't notice too much difference. When people moved out, other people moved in. And it's increased and increased. It's a nice place to live. We have quite a population of retired people. But [the population] did go down [then] and, of course, you missed the old friends that left. They had to [leave] because their jobs were gone. Some of them were old enough to retire, anyway, so they retired and stayed here.

Can you tell me about any women who were notable in the affairs of Boulder City?

I know that there's got to be quite a few of them that were notable, but.... I know that Mrs. Godbey has been one of the older old-timers that was here from the earlier days. You ought to talk to her sometime. [Erma O. Godbey has been interviewed by the University of Nevada-Reno's Oral History Program. Her oral history is entitled, Pioneering in Boulder City, Nevada.—ed.]

Was there any female leadership of any kind?

I don't know. I know that Mrs. Garrett, the music teacher, [was] one of our mainstays for years.

Was she here in 1933, 1934 or 1935?

No, she wasn't here that early.

That's what I'm really principally interested in is that period while the dam was still under construction.

I can't remember. I think that you'll find [that during the dam construction period] , most of us who were here...I was not married then...came with their husbands. They were housewives. They didn't have a second job. The second jobs came during World War II. Most people stayed and took care of their families. They probably were prominent in their home, but in the business world, no. There was no offices. If the men worked for the government, they were a secretary, and they were very low on the scale. The first hospital that we had here was up on the hill where it [is] now. At the time that it was built, that hospital was just for the men workers. There was no women allowed in the hospital as patients. No women patients [were] allowed for a good many years..

Where-did women go for medical treatment?

To Vegas. It was built solely to take care of the men who were hurt on the dam.

Have you ever heard of any woman who was turned away?

No. No, I suppose in case of emergency they possibly could have done something

about it, but that was the way the hospital was until the city took it over. [I] can't remember which year we bought into the hospital government. The government took it over for a while. But you couldn't be a patient in the hospital the first few years we were here. It was just for the men and, [as] I said, the women's job was usually taking care of the children and their homes. Very few women worked.

Were there any women's organizations in town?

Church groups [were] all. Women's clubs didn't start till later. The Mothers Club started about 1935, 1936 or 1937. Most of them were connected with churches.

Were women involved in organizing important annual social events?

Not in those early days that I recall. There [may] have been [some], but I was in [my] teens. Maybe I didn't know about [them].

PHOTOGRAPHS



Interior of Smith's root beer stand, Boulder City, ca. 1934.
At counter are Mary Ann (Vaughan) Merrill at left and
Milly Grosnick. Virginia "Teddy" Fenton stands third from right.

Photograph courtesy of Carl and Mary Ann Merrill



Interior of Manis department store, Boulder City, ca. 1935.

Photograph courtesy of Manis Collection, UNLV Library

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B

Boulder City, Nevada, 4-10,
12-14, 15-37; churches,
20-22; city ordinances, 18,
22-26, 27, 31-32; hospital,
36-37; police force, 18, 27,
29; schools, 16, 30; social
structure, 16-18; utilities,
8-9, 35; women in, 36-37.
See also Businesses/services
(Boulder City); Structures/
places (Boulder City)
Boulder Dam (Nevada), 34-35;
employment, 25-26; occupa-
tions, 2, 10, 32-33; trans-
portation, 10-11, 14
Businesses/services (Boulder
City), 13, 23, 35; central
market, 13; company store,
13, 23; Manix store, 13;
Smith's root beer stand,
3-4, 19

C

Crowe, Frank T., 17, 31

E

Ely, Sims, 27-30

G

Godbey, Erma, 36
Godbey family (Boulder City),
21

H

Hospital, Boulder City, 36-37
Hospitals, Tucson, 15

L

Las Vegas, Nevada, 4-5, 19-20,
23, 30

M

McAdams, E. H., 11
McKeeversville, Nevada, 5,
9-10; housing, 10
Merrill, Carl, 32-33
Merrill, Jerry, 16
Merrill, Michael, 16, 33
Merrill family (Boulder City),
16, 33
Mormons (Boulder City), 20,
21-22
Murphy, Gertrude Helen
(mother), 2, 12

R

Railroad Pass (Clark County,
Nevada), 3
Religion (Boulder City), 20-22

S

Six Companies, Inc. "Big Six"
(Boulder City), 11, 17, 21
Smith's root beer stand
(Boulder City), 3-4, 19
Smith's root beer stand (Las
Vegas), 19-20
Sports and leisure, 4, 14-15,
18-20, 21, 22
Structures/places (Boulder
City): churches, 20-21; city
gate, 14, 27; company
housing, 5-8; government
housing, 6, 7-8, 13-14;
hospital, 36; housing, 5-6;
Legion Hall, 4;
Structures/places (McKeevers-
ville): housing, 9-10

T

Tucson, Arizona, 14-15

U

Utilities, 8-9, 10, 35

V

Vaughan, George (brother), 2

Vaughan, Larry (brother),
11-12

Vaughan, Lyle Turner (father),
1-4, 10, 13

Vaughan family, 1-3, 11-12

W

Women, 36-37; discrimination
against, 36-37; social life,
37

Y

Young, Walker, 26-27